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ABSTRACT

Many couples suffer a decline in marital satisfaction over the transition to parenthood. Previous research indicated that a couple's relational efficacy (a measure of a couple's belief in their ability to solve problems) before the birth of their first child was one of the strongest predictors of their marital satisfaction after the birth. This study investigated the correlation between couples' (N=33) behaviors and the specific efficacy rating given to the topic they were discussing. Relational efficacy was assessed by giving couples a list of 12 specific topic areas where married couples commonly have disagreements, for example, in-laws or money. Results indicated that: (1) relational efficacy was strongly correlated with couples' problem-solving behaviors; (2) when both specific relational efficacy and the probability of husband and wife problem-solving behaviors were used to predict changes in marital satisfaction, the variance which they accounted for overlapped, implying that relational efficacy predicted change in marital satisfaction because it was related to couples' problem-solving behaviors; and (3) several problem-solving behaviors were strong predictors of change in marital satisfaction, with wife emotional validators and husband problem-solving facilitators predicting increased satisfaction, while husband problem-solving inhibitors and husband depressives predicted decreased satisfaction. (ABL)

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Does Relational Efficacy Index Interactional Behaviors Associated
with Marital Satisfaction Across the Transition to Parenthood?

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Many couples suffer a decline in marital satisfaction over the transition to parenthood; some couples do not. Paul Benson (1988, 1991) carefully investigated the predictors of relationship change. He found that a couple's relational efficacy before the birth of their first child was one of the strongest predictors of their marital satisfaction after the birth. His results provoke a question which I will address: why is relational efficacy such a good predictor?

Relational efficacy is a measure of the couples' belief in their ability to solve problems. In addition to Benson's study, previous studies have shown that relational efficacy seems to mediate the effects of stress on marital satisfaction (Higgins-Rhodes, 1985; Meeks, Arnkoff, Glass, & Notarius, 1986). I would hypothesize that it predicts marital satisfaction because it is related to couples' problem-solving behaviors (see Figure 1). Presumably, couples who have higher relational efficacy resolve their problems in a more positive way. Couples who can resolve problems in a positive way can cope with challenges like change and stress, and still maintain their marital satisfaction. The transition to parenthood is a coping challenge which involves stress and change. Many couples' problem-solving may not be adequate.

Two to three months before the baby was born, half of the couples in Benson's sample discussed and tried to resolve a difficult problem in their relationship.¹ To standardize salience, each couple discussed the topic that was most problematic for them. Trained observers coded the audiotapes of these problem-solving discussions.

This presentation will address three questions: 1) First, is relational efficacy related to couples' problem-solving behaviors? 2) Second, does relational efficacy predict changes in marital satisfaction because it is related to problem-solving behaviors? 3) Third, if problem-solving behaviors are a good predictor of change in marital satisfaction, which behaviors are most important?

To answer the first question, I investigated the correlation between couples' behaviors and the specific efficacy rating they gave to the topic they were discussing. Relational efficacy was assessed by giving couples a list of

¹ [The sample sizes for the data analyses discussed here were 33 couples at the 3 months prebirth and 4 months postbirth assessments, and 27 wives and 26 husbands at the 18 months postbirth follow-up.]

twelve specific topic areas where married couples commonly have disagreements, for example, in-laws, or money.² For each topic area, husbands and wives were asked: Out of every ten disagreements that come up in this area, how many do you believe you and your spouse resolve to your mutual satisfaction? For example, one wife might believe that she and her husband are only able to resolve 3 out of 10 disagreements that come up in the area of household responsibilities. Her specific relational efficacy score for that area would be 3. I hypothesized that couples with higher specific relational efficacy scores would have more positive and fewer negative behaviors in their problem-solving discussions of that topic.

In the coding system we used to describe the couples' problem-solving, behaviors are logically grouped according to their functions into six different summary codes. Three summary codes are positive, three are negative. The first positive summary code is Problem-solving Facilitators. They move the problem-solving process forward by actions such as defining the problem or proposing a solution. The second positive summary code is Emotional Validators. They show support or concern for the other person in the discussion, for example, through agreement, or asking the other person about their feelings. The third positive summary code is Self-Disclosures. This summary code includes directly expressing feelings, beliefs or desires.

The first summary code in the negative category is Problem-solving Inhibitors. They hinder or block the problem-solving process through actions like excusing or minimizing the problem. The second negative summary code is Emotional Invalidators. They undermine the other person through actions like criticism, disagreement, or sarcasm. The last negative summary code is Depressives. These are actions typical of a depressed person, including using a symptom as an excuse, or expressing fears or worries.

I found that specific relational efficacy was significantly correlated with the probability of certain problem-solving behaviors. For husbands, specific relational efficacy was significantly correlated with their three most frequent behaviors, problem-solving facilitators, problem-solving inhibitors, and emotional invalidators. For wives, specific relational efficacy was

² [The other areas were: communication, religion, sex, recreation, friends, alcohol & drugs, jealousy, children, decision-making responsibilities, and household responsibilities; respondents could add 1 or 2 idiosyncratic areas if they wished].

significantly correlated with their four most frequent behaviors, problem-solving facilitators, problem-solving inhibitors, emotional invalidators, and emotional validators. My point here (see Figure 2) is that specific relational efficacy was significantly related to 94% of the wives' behavior and 89% of the husbands' behavior. The correlations ranged from .30 to .60 and the relationships were in the hypothesized directions.

The second question for this presentation was: Does relational efficacy predict changes in marital satisfaction because it is related to problem-solving behaviors? To answer this question, both specific relational efficacy and the probability of husband and wife problem-solving behaviors were used to predict changes in marital satisfaction.³ The variance which they accounted for overlapped (see Figures 3 & 4). This implies that relational efficacy may be such a good predictor of changes in marital satisfaction because of its ability to predict problem-solving behaviors.

Now let's turn to the third question: if problem-solving behaviors are a good predictor of change in marital satisfaction, which behaviors are most important? As Figures 3 & 4 indicate, behavior was a very good predictor of changes in marital satisfaction. Let me list the behaviors which were significantly associated with change, and then I will discuss why these particular behaviors may be important. Two behaviors were associated with increased marital satisfaction. They were wife emotional validators, and husband problem-solving facilitators. Four behaviors were associated with decreased marital satisfaction. They were husband problem-solving inhibitors, wife problem-solving inhibitors, wife emotional invalidators, and husband depressives.

Why would the probability of these behaviors predict changes in marital satisfaction over the transition to parenthood? The results suggest that wife emotional validators are the most significant predictor, especially at four months after the birth. Why? Validation within marriage may be an important source of social support for husbands (Notarius & Pellegrini, 1985). Perhaps it is especially important to husbands just after the baby is born, when the husband may be feeling somewhat displaced in his wife's affection. Or perhaps

³ [Since I was trying to account for changes in marital satisfaction, I entered prebirth marital satisfaction into the regressions first. Prebirth marital satisfaction takes a large chunk of the variance in postbirth marital satisfaction.]

wife emotional validators encourage husbands to persist in problem-solving. Earlier studies have indicated that wife agreement is important to the process of problem-solving (Gottman, 1979; Gottman, Markman & Notarius, 1977).

The results also suggest that husband problem-solving facilitators are increasingly important to enhance marital satisfaction, whereas husband negative behaviors such as husband problem-solving inhibitors and depressives predict decreased satisfaction. A higher probability of husband problem-solving facilitators and a lower probability of husband negatives may reflect a husband's ability to persist in problem-solving and resolve problems, even when discussing a difficult "hot" topic, rather than being sidetracked or disabled by emotional arousal. Wife negatives such as problem-solving inhibitors and emotional invalidators also predict reduced satisfaction, but they decrease in importance over time, compared to husbands' behaviors. Perhaps this is because wives may be less likely to be sidetracked or disabled by emotion, or are less likely to avoid problem-solving in order to avoid emotional arousal.

In contrast to wife emotional validators, husband emotional validators do not predict increased marital satisfaction. Husband emotional validators have little correlation with marital satisfaction during pregnancy, and even show a very weak trend to predict decreased wife satisfaction at four months postbirth. Why don't husband emotional validators predict increased wife satisfaction? One early study (Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974) of interaction before and after the transition to parenthood found that husbands increased their supportive behavior during the wife's pregnancy, but sharply decreased their supportiveness, returning to their baseline levels, after the child was born. These investigators noted the increase in supportiveness was temporary, destined to drop precipitously after the child was born, as they put it, "just when support is most needed" (Raush et al., 1974, p.191). They proposed that "one might expect wives to become more dissatisfied" (p.191) when husband supportiveness dropped off, but they did not investigate the effect on marital satisfaction. Perhaps a similar behavioral process was occurring in this sample. If a husband increased his emotional validation during the pregnancy but suddenly decreased it after the birth, this may result in a decline in the wife's satisfaction. By 18 month follow-up, the relationship between husband emotional validation and change in wife satisfaction was no longer significant, perhaps because wives have reacclimated to the husband's usual level of emotional validation.

Another possibility is that husbands may use emotional validators differently than wives. Husbands may be more prone to avoid interaction or conflict by agreement; when wives use emotional validators, they may be more supportive (Fishman, 1978).

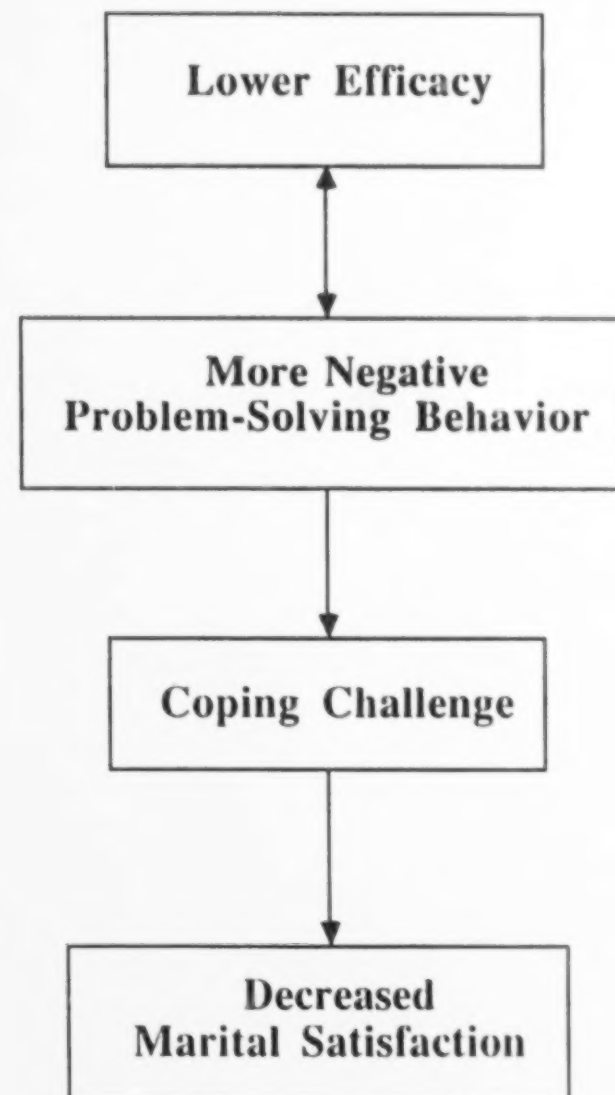
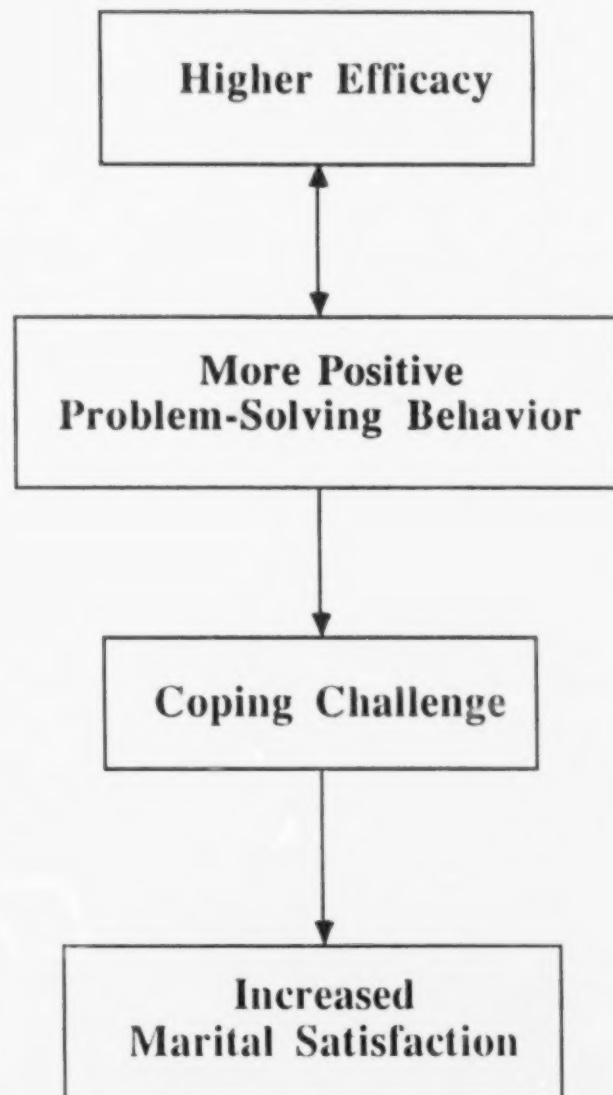
Wife emotional invalidators during pregnancy predict decreased wife satisfaction at 4 months postbirth. The early infancy period may be especially stressful for wives because of disrupted sleep, hormone changes, etc. It may be particularly harmful to the satisfaction of those wives who are already having to resort to the coercive tactic of emotional invalidation during pregnancy (when husbands may be more supportive and agreeable than they will be postbirth).

In summary, I have addressed the question "Why is relational efficacy such a good predictor of changes in marital satisfaction?" by looking at three related issues. First, I found that relational efficacy was strongly correlated with couples' problem-solving behaviors. Secondly, when both specific relational efficacy and the probability of husband and wife problem-solving behaviors were used to predict changes in marital satisfaction, the variance which they accounted for overlapped. This implies that relational efficacy predicted change in marital satisfaction because it was related to couples' problem-solving behaviors. Third, several problem-solving behaviors were strong predictors of change in marital satisfaction. Wife emotional validators and husband problem-solving facilitators predict increased satisfaction, while husband problem-solving inhibitors and husband depressives predict decreased satisfaction. The probability of these behaviors may reflect a husband's ability to persist in problem-solving and resolve problems, even though the couple is discussing a difficult "hot" topic, rather than being sidetracked or disabled by emotional arousal. Wives' problem-solving inhibitors and emotional invalidators also predict reduced satisfaction, but they decrease in importance over time compared to the husband behaviors. Perhaps this is because wives may be less likely to be sidetracked or disabled by emotion, or may be less likely to avoid problem-solving in order to avoid emotional arousal.

[Note: For further details on data analysis and other aspects of this study, see Irwin, 1991.]

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Behavior Significantly Correlated with Specific Relational Efficacy

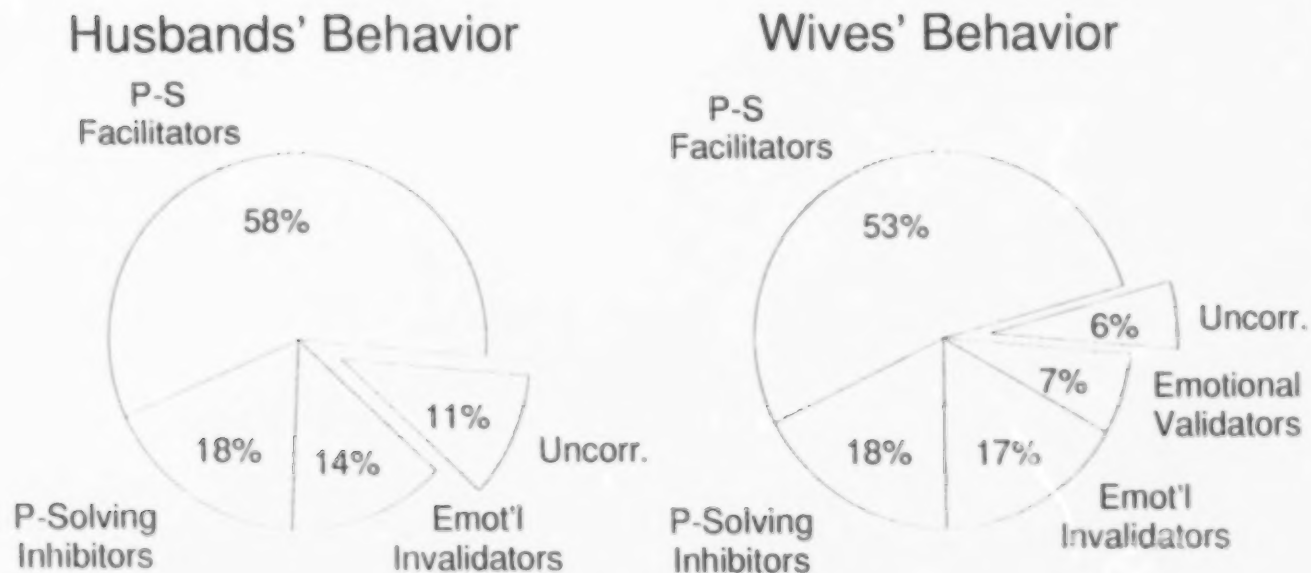


Figure 2

Breakdown of Variance in Wife DAS 4 months Postbirth



Figure 3

Breakdown of Variance Accounted
for by Specific RE & Behavior

DAS = Marital Satisfaction

Breakdown of Variance in Husband DAS 4 months Postbirth

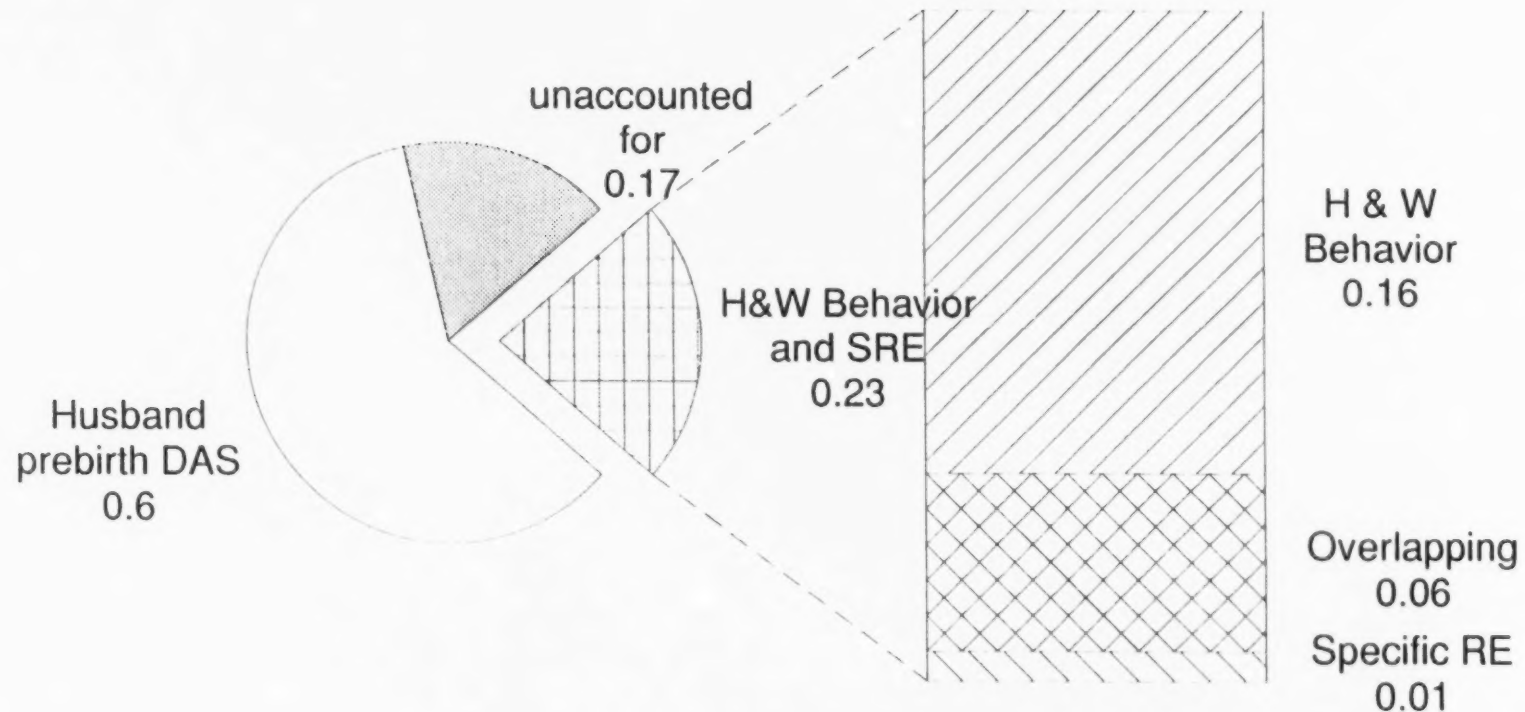


Figure 4

Breakdown of Variance Accounted
for by Specific RE & Behavior

DAS = Marital Satisfaction